

# THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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NOVEMBER, 1944

## The Higher Function

Adverse criticism over the past decade has sent those who profess English scurrying to defensive fox-holes, there to avoid the constant sniping. Some white flags have been waved even from these protected positions. The "enemy" has occasionally been willing to make concessions. These concessions reveal more truly than the sniping really significant weakness, for they show a confused understanding of the dual function of most departments of English.

A sharp distinction should be made between the directly utilitarian, service courses in English composition and the indirectly utilitarian—the cultural—courses in English literature. The distinction is obvious to college teachers of English. Service courses, they know, are worked out in collaboration with the schools and departments that order them. The courses are usually cut to the specifications of engineers, scientists, home economists, and the like. Courses in literature, on the other hand, grow up within the department and are indigenous to it. To the outlanders of other departments, these courses in literature may seem exotics about which they profess to know little and, sometimes, to care less. That is why service courses will receive total faculty support no matter how they multiply; whereas in any but purely liberal arts colleges, courses in English literature may be regarded with indifference at best and suspicious opposition at worst.

At one university new courses in English literature were proposed to the general faculty for consideration and approval. Opposition quickly developed. The argument was that since some students (many perhaps) were weak in English composition, why not offer more courses in composition rather than introduce a course in *Prose of the Seventeenth Century* or some similar academic luxury. It was indicated that any increase in the number of composition courses would be welcomed.

This university was already offering all the standard courses in composition, plus such frills as *Technical Writing* and *Business English* (the latter called *Bus. Communications* by the school ordering the course, a confusing title to students of economics who tried to schedule it as a course in transportation). It was clear, however, that such courses as *How to Prepare Botany Reports* or *Style and Structure in Cooking Recipes* would have been hailed as signs of a progressive department of English. It was also clear that certain departments did not even think of "English" in terms of English literature. "Good in English" meant to them an ability to write with-

out too many errors; "bad in English" meant that the culprits needed more courses in English. All agreed that English is difficult, English composition, of course. Thermodynamics is difficult, too, but no one proposes more courses in thermodynamics as a corrective for this condition.

There should be no quarrel with the desire of schools of agriculture, engineering, home economics, science, and business administration to have service courses in English composition. Courses geared to certain technical requirements, because well motivated, may be valuable. That such courses should pre-empt the title English and make it stand for the total recognized, worthwhile effort of a department of English is less than sane.

The teaching of composition and the teaching of literature are two entirely different processes, so different that there is ample justification for bisecting a department of English on that basis. Harvard, Wellesley, and others have done this. All large departments should do this. Smaller departments will always have to combine the two functions, and instructors will have to learn two processes, two types of pedagogy and, if successful, will have to be enthusiastic about both. Even in small departments, however, it is useful to organize the teaching and the curriculum on distinctly separate bases.

Basic courses in composition are fundamental to every other course in college or university, including with the others, courses in English literature. Advanced courses in English literature are—or may be made—true syntheses of a full, liberal education. One stands at the threshold of all learning; the other occupies the inner sanctum. It is surely time that instructors of English take a more militant pride in their higher function, that they insist on recognition of courses in literature as the core instead of the vague periphery of an English department's offerings.

Lieut. K. L. Knickerbocker,  
Exec. Officer, Navy V-12,  
Ohio Wesleyan Univ.

## The Useful and the Scientific

With careful preparation, collegiate teaching in the United States may gain much from the dislocations caused by the war. In the recent stock-taking forced inevitably upon us, we teachers have had a chance to determine what has been selling, and what has been left to gather dust and rot, psychologically speaking, on our pedagogical shelves. The results might be divergently interpreted. Maybe those unsold articles of ours, those courses or principles that we have failed to get across to our students, are of their nature unwanted; or maybe we have found the cheap, the immediate, the flashy easier to impart than the sturdily good. Whether to throw the neglected items out the window and clear the shelves for those more in demand, or to dust them off and offer them afresh to our classroom public, is a problem that we must solve individual case by individual case.

We in the field of literature, nowadays, are faced by two pressures that can easily throw us off balance, by two demands that we must decide ahead of time how to meet: that of the "Useful", and that of the "Scientific". Of the two, the danger of the Useful has been present with us in our democratic American civilization throughout the past century; we have had to meet its attack time and again and have been able to plan and construct our defenses against it. Our attitude is, obviously, that we have no intention of teaching anything useless; that an impractical education is to that extent damned; but that there are kinds and levels of practicality of which some of the slower-witted of our "practical men", those who for instance object to the teaching of Chaucer in wartime, are unaware. There is the education that trains us to look after a Diesel engine or to market textiles in Peru; the necessity of making a living is not to be denied and must be met in any sensible curriculum. But there is also the problem of what to do with our lives, of how to

harmonize and enrich our living, of seeing beyond our immediate concerns the horizon by which we are to orient our efforts. To merely sleep and feed and procreate is to be but half alive. This added aliveness, alertness, subtlety of perception, imaginative grasp is the province of the arts, among which in the English-speaking world literature has normally been predominant. The liberal arts have their own niche in any scheme that does not confuse practicality with nearsightedness.

The second danger is more difficult to meet, not only because it is subtler, but because we have so long, if unconsciously, surrendered to it. The shibboleth of the "scientific" has long ruled the scholarly roost without any clear analysis of just what science in scholarship would amount to. Science, in so far as it seeks truth through careful consideration of fact, has affected scholarship beneficially. In so far as it has led to the mere agglomeration of facts of no conceivable significance, it has run counter to those purposes for which the arts exist. A scientific fact is not always a literary fact. The exact date of Chaucer's birth is of vastly less importance than, say, the understanding of the character of the Wife of Bath, yet there is a type of scholar who looks upon the second problem as a concern simply of the dilettante. It is hard to see what much of recent scholarship has accomplished beyond the dehumanization of literature.

It might be well for the scientific scholar to examine the nature of science in those fields in which it has been so successfully applied. As important to the scientist as the accumulation and verification of facts is his ability to choose the pertinent and discard the impertinent, to keep in view his one problem, admitting only, though often by inspiration or accident, that information that will aid in its solution. The weakness of so much scholarship of the past two generations has been just this quality of impertinence. Many of the authors on whom so much research has been conducted, mainly, we should guess, because no one has paid them attention before, are not literary in any true sense of the term, for all that they have written the world would very gladly let die. About the major figures volumes have been published the only interest in which comes from the inclusion of new particulars which nobody has considered it worth the trouble to mention before. The great and abiding humanness of literature has been lost to sight while we have become entangled in the undergrowths of learning.

Were scholarship but incidental to teaching, such a condition would (Continued on Page 3)

## Grecian Statues

Dead our hearts and lost our song,  
We are marble, age, and sun;  
Past uncertain right and wrong,  
We endure through worlds undone.  
Mute, though with the voice of Pan,  
We are Arcady and youth;  
We are gods and we are man,  
Western Isles and captive truth.  
We are blind and maimed and old;  
Ruined, we have mocked the sky;

Half our legends half untold,  
Broken, have refused to die.  
Ages glitter and decline,  
Perish with their perished suns;  
Linger here in plane and line  
Sculptors, our Pigmaliions.  
We are blind and maimed and old,  
We are marble, age, and sun;  
Half our legends half untold,  
We endure through worlds undone.  
Le Roy Smith, Jr.

## THE NEWS LETTER

Editor

BURGES JOHNSON

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## Editorial

CEA members are reminded that this *News Letter* is not so much a magazine as a gossip sheet of our guild. Any value which it may possess lies in its ability to present a cross-section of English-teacher experience and opinion. Each member adds to its value by contributing ideas, suggestions and bits of experience from his college and section of the country. He is not invited to be either literary or profound—though no penalty is imposed for either quality—but he is expected to be frank and honest and concise, and evidence thereby his desire to aid a common understanding within our profession.

This notice is directed especially to our welcome group of new members who have joined within the past two months. It might be well for all of them to feel that a brief contribution to the *News Letter* is a form of initiation, required of them by the secretary-editor and their own consciences.

Sample copies of this and preceding issues of the *News Letter* have been sent out to many college English teachers who are non-members. Any member in good standing receiving one of the extra copies is asked to pass it along to some colleague who might be persuaded to join. This has been explained in the past, but we continue to receive letters from members pointing out that they have received two copies and suggesting that we correct our list.

The Executive Secretary of the CEA is seeking an understudy for his position. The candidate should be a college English teacher, active or retired, with some editorial experience, who is eager to be of service to his guild. The reward measured in dollars is nil; but

measured in pleasurable experience, in a widening acquaintance among teachers of English in different parts of the country, and in accumulation of friends, the pay is enormous. Write the Secretary with frankness and without false modesty. Such letters will be considered strictly confidential.

Dear Editor:

Heinrich Heine says "Even in the cradle was the line of march laid out for all my life." Northland College was born in the cut-over country of North Wisconsin. Because the whole area is financially "substandard" and a "problem area" (think how we love it to have our own Uncle Sam tell us that)—and because we are the only liberal arts college located in the region—250 miles to the nearest downstate college—we are growing up with the country and trying to adapt our program to its needs. Thus while any college English course emphasizes careful observation, cleancut analysis and effective statement, we focus much of our observation, analysis and statement on our own home territory. This does not make us provincial; it does give us something to bite into, and the integration of English with other Departments of the College becomes essential and operates to the benefit of all.

N. B. Dexter,  
Northland College.

Dear Editor:

As one who is sometimes put on the defensive by her friends who question the value for college students of a major in English Composition, may I put down a few of the reasons why I continue to believe that such a major has genuine usefulness? For five years now I have taught one section of our senior course, which includes in its six semester hours the writing of one full-length play and of one long piece of prose (fiction or fact, provided the facts are susceptible of artistic arrangement and expression) as well as a number of short critical studies. As the years have gone on, I have been increasingly impressed by the notable development which is shown in the course of nine months, not only by the abler students in the course, but by every student.

In every instance without exception, there has been real growth in maturity of reasoning, of sympathy, and of understanding other human beings, as well as greater mastery of English expression and of artistic form. To be sure, students at the end of four years are beginning to realize responsibilities and to question old values and consider which are to be preserved; but the concentration on problems which lie near their decisions and doubts, the going over and the reconsidering, in revisions, of these matters, undoubtedly ripens judgment and deepens interest, and gives the emotional satisfaction which students gifted in music and painting and sculpture receive from their work in those arts.

While I am far from advocating the publication of much of this beginners' work, a good deal of it is worth consideration for publishing,

as a revelation to older readers of the minds of the young and sensitive. The students in our classes are told to read the works of youthful poets and novelists, now classics. Why should they not hope that here and there one of them may have something to say that is worth putting into print?

The awards offered by Messrs. Dodd, Mead and Company definitely for college students have been encouraging to my students, as indicating that some publishers seriously look for new writers among college juniors and seniors. It has been my good fortune (this sounds like good old-fashioned boasting, but it is really not meant that way; I have just had good luck) to have among my students these last two years the winners of these annual awards. Catherine Lawrence's novel, *The Winnowing Wind*, is to come out this October. Mary Vardoulakis has the award for this last year. The first work is the outgrowth of its author's experience in a war-plant three summers ago; the second is an account, in fictional form, of the immigration to this country from Crete, by one who is the daughter of one of those immigrants, and who spent part of her girlhood in a small Cretan village. Each of these students has shown developing power to grasp problems and understand motives of action.

The runners-up in these two years have also, by a freak of chance, been in my class. Both took as subjects the way in which the war came to America, as life in a summer resort showed it. The two were completely different, and both were of real interest, showing serious judgment of things seen and experienced. One interesting study last year was made by a girl from Augusta, Georgia, of the effect on a generous, child-like plantation Negro of the demoralization of a city near a camp. Another study (part of which appeared in the September *Harper's*) was by a Hindu student who had gone back to India after ten years of childhood in England. A student who was half-Chinese and half-American wrote of her change from something like shame of her Chinese heritage and father to pride in both.

Such examinations of one's origins and surroundings seem to me to come with special value in youth, before prejudices have settled in too deeply, when the rich curiosity of childhood is not too far away, interest in pattern and phrase are fresh and keen.

I should add that our Department requires each of its majors to show in her program a substantial number of courses in literature and generally in history.

Elizabeth W. Marwaring,  
Wellesley College.

Dear Mr. Editor:

Is it time to yield to I cannot help but wonder instead of saying I cannot help wondering, etc? And when tired, I find it hard, too, to keep struggling any longer against real as an adverb. Language does change, of course. Has the time come now to accept these changes? I hope not, but I'd like to get your opinion.

Anon.

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(The following sentences were taken from letters received in the office of a Washington Bureau, from mothers and wives of men in the service. They are either making or correcting applications for allotment. And these people all have the vote.—Ed.)

Please send me my elopement as I have a 4-months old baby and he is my only support and I need all I can get to buy food and keep him in close.

Both sides of my parents is poor and I can't expect nothing from them as my mother has been in bed with the same doctor for one year and won't change.

Please send my wife's form to fill out.

Please send me a letter and tell me if my husband has made application for a wife and baby.

I have already wrote to the president and if I don't hear from you I will write Uncle Sam and tell him about both.

I have no clothing for a year and have been regularly visited by the clergy. This is my 8th child and what are you going to do about it?

I can't get sick pay, I got six children, can you tell me what this is?

Sir, I am forwarding you my marriage certificate and 2 children, one is a mistake as you can see.

Please find out for certain if my husband is dead as the man I am living with won't eat or do anything until he nose for sure.

I am annoyed to find you branded my children as illiterate, it is a shame and a dirty lie as I married his father a week before he was born.

In answer to your letter I gave birth to a boy weighing 110

pounds. I hope this is satisfactory.

I have no children as my husband is a truck driver and works day and night.

You changed my little boy to a girl, does this make any difference.

In accordance with your instructions I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope.

I am told that my husband sits in the YMCA every night with the piano playing in his uniform.

R. M. Smith,  
Lehigh University.

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### THE USEFUL AND THE SCIENTIFIC

(Continued from Page 1)

not have the bitter significance that it has. But in collegiate circles in this country, "publication" has all too often been made the be-all and all, the sole criterion of the teacher seeking advancement. Many a young Ph.D., facing an actual classroom and the impact of actual students, has had to shrug off his shoulders an oppressive weight of insignificant information that he has wasted years in acquiring, and which he continues to keep, card-catalogued in his study, only as raw material for articles with which to impress the scholarly world. Some never recover from their graduate apprenticeship; through the rest of their teaching careers they flounder in the morass of a general aimlessness, imprisoning young imaginations in petty cells of meaningless facts.

If we would have literature compete in favor and respect, among undergraduates, with chemistry, commerce, and football, we must stop betraying our students for the sake of seeing our names in print, and restore to the teaching of literature its essential humanness.

William J. Calvert, Jr.,  
Jacksonville, Ala.

### What Now?

"What now? I have read your old assignment," says the student with a petulance fostered and nourished by a mild defiance. Apparently as far as he is concerned a perfunctory task is done and the incident is closed.

The next move, if one is to be made at all, is the teacher's move. To him (or her) falls the commission of making the complacent student see that he has not even started, that the value of a piece of literature is not so much what it contains but what one does with what it contains, that the vital thing in reading is the energy of the reader—energy to see relationships, parallels, and applications (intellectual and emotional) to the baffling processes of living in our complex world.

There are those, however, who have taken all too literally the dictum that literature "must not preach." These are they who would emphasize the types of literature only as works of art. A novel is a deft weaving of several threads of human action. A short story is an exacting compression of suggestive details into a "unity of effect." A lyric is an exercise in emotional tone, word harmony, and vivid imagery. A drama is a series of climatic situations exhibiting subtle interrelationships of character upon character. An essay is a display of precise diction, logical progression of thought, and a wealth of appropriate allusions. Dominated by this attitude the critic, with conscious deliberation, equates literature with the sensory and plastic arts, and is pleased with the perfection of creative technique. The fact that any theme, good or bad, beautiful or sordid, heroic or villainous, may be treated artistically dissipates all concern with ethics.

Yet few will deny that the important difference between literature and the other arts is that literature must deal more directly than they with human emotions and human relationships. This difference, instead of obliteration deserves emphasis, for it is the very essence which gives to literature its superior position. Literature, whatever else it may be, can be no less than a demonstration of the ways in which life is lived. It registers triumphs and heart-aches; it depicts conflicts and collaborations; it expounds fancies and philosophies; it exposes conditions to applaud or to condemn. Do what one will, everyone instinctively passes moral judgments upon the conduct of his fellow mortals.

The "what now?" for the student is, assuredly, to be made aware of the artistic values of literature, but beyond this imperatively he must not be permitted to ignore the urgency of moral implications. He must realize that both are indispensable and complementary. Pearl Buck's story *The Angel* is a consummate demonstration of artistic workmanship, but just as pertinent (if not more so) is the invitation to contemplate some of those malingered souls who are accused of being "set in their ways." The chief character is a perfectionist. Are there perfectionists in your community, among your acquaintances? Are you one? Is there anything to be said in their defence? A Hardy novel provides an excellent opportunity for the study of plot manipulation and the skillful tying in of motivating details, but it also poses the question of whether the fortunes of life do depend so much upon chances which have brought you where you are! Frost's little lyric *The Road Not Taken* presents a familiar truth with fine imagery and delicate emotion. But the problem of making decisions is inescapable. Can one be sure that the present road is better than some other? Consider well the choices which have brought you where you are! Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows* is more than a skillful blend of humorous phantasy and artful dialogue because it pries deeply into the mysteries of human nature. Pick out the people around you who are blind to faults because of crass egotism. Pick out those who have a saving sense of humor. Bacon's *Of Adversity* is a gem of logic in miniature with incisive aphorisms and startling metaphors. One must inquire, however, if the aphorisms are really true.

A dismal inadequacy results if reading does not become a mental challenge. A student too often fails to associate what he reads with the life he leads. Characters in fiction remain fictitious; ideas in an essay remain hypothetical cases. On the other hand the student who finds the full and complete answer to "what now?" recognizes that literature has infinite ramifications. He questions, tests, evaluates, approves, censures, but ultimately and inevitably he comes closer and closer to that phantom known as truth.

Douglas S. Mead,  
Pennsylvania State College.

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**Periodical Notes**

Every living being, plant or animal, generates electric current! *Life* (Aug. 14) presents experimental evidence that links up interestingly with recently reported data on variations in current generated by the human brain. "Science Comes to Languages," points out *Fortune*; new understanding of language and new methods of teaching are already bringing swift and almost unbelievable facility in foreign tongues. Our libraries may some day be contained in their card catalogs, says *Time* (Sept. 4), for microprint can now reproduce 250 pages on the back of a 3-by-5 library card, and may soon double that amount, reducing the Harvard classics to the size of an ordinary pack of playing cards.

Urging that "A Free Flow of News Must Link the Nations," James L. Fly (*Free World*—Aug.) stresses the importance of uniform and low rates for all messages, instantaneous radio communication between important areas, and free ingress and egress of information. Within America, Celia Kraft, in "Demagogue's Harvest" (*Tomorrow*, July) would have the intellectuals learn to reach the majority of the citizens, now led astray by practically-minded fascists who well understand their minds and hearts.

The *Saturday Review* has had two recent outstanding issues, one devoted to Bernard Shaw (July 22) and one to its own twentieth anniversary (Aug. 5). In the latter, Clifton Fadiman looks favorably upon "The American Novel of the Truce," which he thinks has paved the way toward a mature post-war interpretation. Harry O. Overstreet would have the fiction-writers so portray the Negro characteristics and aspiration as to awaken respect for that maligned "irresponsible" race (Aug. 26). Hemingway is interestingly analyzed by Malcolm Cowley (*New Republic*, Aug. 14) as dealing in images symbolic of an inner world. J. Donald Adams, writing on "The Shape of Books to Come" (*Tomorrow*—Aug. cites Hemingway and Huxley as sounding an affirmative note, the identification with forces outside oneself; the cynical writing of the first post-war period, he concludes, is not likely to reappear.

Today, a beginning is being made, says Robert Appleby in *Britain Today* (Aug.), toward restoring the pride in labor temporarily lost through the advent of the machine. The Popes' Encyclicals on Labor are summarized by James L. Donnelly in *Vital Speeches* (Aug. 1) as urging Christian ideals, the rights of both employer and employees, and retention of the principles of private ownership. Sidney Hillman (*New Republic*, Aug. 21) explains that the CIO Political Action Committee, organized to offset the militant forces of reaction, hopes to arouse the progressive element to think and vote. Americans must be educated to discriminate between real leaders, whose work is to develop personality in those led, and their opponents, the dictators and supermen, says Lyn T. White in

**Vital Speeches** (Aug. 15).

John Dewey takes up the cudgels for a unified education, in which vocational training is no longer separated from its social, moral, and scientific contexts (*Fortune*—Aug.) and pressure-groups are warned against in "Progressive Education on the Defensive", in *Current History* (Aug.). Nothing that the war marks a stop in the transformation of our social order, Edmund E. Day in "The Challenge to Popular Education" lists five needed gains. (*Vital Speeches*, Aug. 1). Disciplined emotions are an often-neglected necessity, asserts George F. Reynolds (*SRL*, Aug. 19), and imaginative literature renders practical service in preparing a student for life. "If we are set on fire, let us be sure it is a worthy flame." We seek the freedom to be human, says Dane Rudhyan (*Free World*—Aug.); the common humanity of all men is the basis of our new world religion.

"What China Offers a World in the Making" (*Asia*, July) is her concept of a moral universe; learning is regarded as for practical use, contentment is the rule, nature the teacher. Chinese teachers and statesmen trust the good that is in man. "U. S. Plans for World Organization" are presented briefly by Vera M. Dean in the August 15 *Foreign Policy Reports*, with selected documents.

A. V. Hall,  
Univ. of Washington.

**"When"**

The word *when* is not unbeautiful even as a mere utterance of sounds. But when Matthew Arnold uses it in his closing quatrain of "The Last Word," it takes on eloquence as thrilling and sustained as the echo of Roland's horn down the passages of Spain. Seldom have art and morals been more completely made one than in this word *when* as used by Arnold to his own deepest self:

Let the victors when they come,  
When the forts of folly fall,  
Find the body by the wall.

He does not say "if they come," or "should the forts of folly fall," but simply "when."

Every college English teacher knows that if we work reasonably, fear complacency, love everybody, and keep fighting to beat hell, then we too can say "when" without the least uncertainty. Who can gainsay Chaucer or Fielding or even Shakespeare? Or Charles Spenser Baldwin as he taught freshman English under a god-spell? But if we say, even to ourselves, that Arnold was too heroic, then perhaps we deny to posterity the ladder by which we climbed.

Deckard Ritter,  
Ohio Wesleyan.

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